



ISSUE BRIEF

Unlocking Potential:
Results of a National
Survey of Postsecondary
Education in State Prisons

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Introduction and Overview

Postsecondary Education in Prisons: A Federal Policy Lens

Postsecondary Education in Prisons: Results of a National Survey

Moving Forward: Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Appendix A

References

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The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IHEP, the reviewers, survey participants, or funder.

Executive Summary

An estimated 2.3 million people are incarcerated in the United States. On any given day, more than one in 100 adults are in jail or prison (Pew Center on the States [Pew] 2008; West 2010). Driven by the tripling of the incarcerated population over the past three decades, the United States has the highest prison population rate in the world (Walmsley 2009)¹ and one out of every 31 U.S. adults is under some form of correctional control (Pew 2008).²

The incarcerated population differs from the general population in important ways. Incarcerated persons are disproportionately likely to come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds; to be members of racial/ethnic minority groups; to have held a low-skill, low-paying job (if employed at all) at the time of arrest; and to be less educated than their counterparts in the general population (Harlow 2003). In short, the sizeable incarcerated population consists of people in critical need of education to improve their post-release opportunities for employment and participation in civil society.

In addition to their educational needs, large incarcerated populations impose significant financial burdens on state budgets. From 2005 through 2009 state spending on corrections grew at a rate faster than any other expenditure category, increasing 25 percent. In comparison, state spending on higher education increased 18 percent during the same period (National Association of State Budget Officers [NASBO] 2009). Taken together, states spend over \$52 billion annually on corrections and related activities (NASBO 2010), an amount that restricts discretionary monies available for other public outlays; one out of every 15 state discretionary spending dollars goes toward corrections-related costs (Pew 2008).

¹ Following the U. S. high-water mark of 756 incarcerations per 100,000 population are Russia (629), Rwanda (604), St. Kitts and Nevis (588), Cuba (531), U.S. Virgin Islands (512), British Virgin Islands (488), Palau (478), Belarus (468), Belize (455), Bahamas (422), Georgia (415), American Samoa (410), Grenada (408), and Anguilla (401).

² "Correctional control" captures persons in jail, in prison, on probation, or otherwise under criminal justice supervision.

Staggering rates of recidivism contribute to the high incarceration levels and associated financial costs. Recidivism occurs when a former inmate commits a criminal act that results in rearrest, reconviction, or return to prison within three years of release (U.S. Bureau

of Justice Statistics [BJS] 2009). Estimates vary, but research suggests that nearly seven in 10 formerly incarcerated persons will commit a new crime, and half will end up back in prison within three years (BJS 2009; Langan and Levin 2002). Given that roughly 95 of every 100 prisoners will eventually rejoin society (Harrison and Beck 2006), policy efforts to decrease the likelihood of recidivism are important on both social and economic grounds.

Focusing on Postsecondary Education in Prisons

In one approach to meet the educational needs of incarcerated populations and reduce levels of recidivism, policymakers have turned to postsecondary correctional education (PSCE). PSCE encompasses any academic or vocational coursework an incarcerated person takes beyond the high school diploma or equivalent that can be used toward a certificate or an associate's, bachelor's, or graduate degree. Though scholarship on the prevalence of PSCE is limited (owing mainly to a lack of systematically collected data comparable across states), research suggests that 35 percent to 42 percent of correctional facilities offer some form of PSCE (Erisman and Contardo 2005; Stephan 2008). Among those who have participated in PSCE, several positive post-release outcomes have been observed, including increased educational attainment levels, reduced recidivism rates, and improved post-release employment opportunities and earnings (Gaes 2008; Meyer et al. 2010; Winterfield et al. 2009).

Despite the positive outcomes associated with PSCE, discussion of postsecondary opportunity for the nation's prison population is notably absent from the top tier of state and federal

policy agendas. This lack of topline policy attention to PSCE is detrimental to the country—postsecondary education has a critical role to play in mitigating challenging social conditions exacerbated by high incarceration levels.

As policymakers consider ways to increase educational attainment, generate future economic growth, and reduce public expenditures, educational opportunity for the incarcerated population should be a meaningful component of policy strategies. Designed to increase knowledge about how states are providing postsecondary education to incarcerated individuals, this brief rests on results of a national survey of state correctional education administrators (CEAs), presenting unique policy relevant information on the availability, administration, and funding of PSCE in state prison systems. A central purpose of the brief is to elevate the policy attention paid to postsecondary opportunity for incarcerated persons.

Key Findings

The data for this brief were gathered from a 19-item Web-based national survey of correctional education administrators (CEAs). Forty-three states responded, for an 86 percent response rate.³ Findings and discussion of the survey highlight student enrollments and completions, instructional methods, eligibility requirements, and funding sources of postsecondary education programs in state prison systems. Key findings include these:

³ The following states did not respond to the survey: Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

- Participating states reported approximately 71,000 persons enrolled in vocational or academic postsecondary education programs in prisons for academic year 2009–10; 6 percent of the incarcerated population in these states.
- Thirteen high-enrollment states accounted for 86 percent of all incarcerated postsecondary students in the state prison systems included in this study.
- Incarcerated students are not earning two- or four-year postsecondary degrees in significant numbers. Findings illustrate that three out of every four students were enrolled in a vocational or certificate program. Although all types of PSCE are valuable, survey results indicate that most incarcerated students are not on an educational pathway likely to result in academic degree attainment.
- Postsecondary correctional education is delivered primarily through onsite instruction. Survey respondents reported logistical challenges associated with providing education in a prison and recommended technology as one way to improve the delivery of PSCE.
- Security protocols and state statutes were identified as significant barriers to expanding the use of Internet technologies to support the delivery of postsecondary education in prisons.
- A critical challenge facing CEAs is securing funding, a reality

that may worsen in coming years because of the financial constraints of state budgets.

- Incarcerated students continue to be denied access to federal and state-based financial aid programs.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of this study, we offer three recommendations to facilitate effective policy innovations in the area of PSCE. Following these recommendations would advance public policy goals of increasing skill and educational acquisition for incarcerated persons and reducing unsustainably high recidivism rates.

1. *To address capacity challenges that limit access to postsecondary education in prisons, federal and state statutes and regulations should be revised to support the development and expansion of Internet-based delivery of such education.*
2. *To increase educational attainment, support economic development, and make efficient use of limited public funding, postsecondary correctional education programs should be closely aligned with state postsecondary education systems and local workforce needs.*
3. *To support increased access to postsecondary education in prisons, federal and state statutes should be amended to make specific categories of incarcerated persons eligible for need-based financial aid.* ❧

Introduction and Overview

Leaders of government, labor, business, and philanthropy are calling on the nation to increase postsecondary attainment levels so the United States can once again become the world's most educated country. Informed by this goal, postsecondary stakeholders are attempting to wring productivity gains out of institutions through innovations and reconfigured pathways into and through postsecondary education for today's students. And yet a sizeable and growing number of potential students from demographic groups critical to increasing national attainment levels (e.g., low-income youth and adults, racial/ethnic minorities, and persons in need of worker retraining and basic skills acquisition) are being locked out of educational opportunity and overlooked in postsecondary access and success discussions. Who are these potential students? Incarcerated persons.

An estimated 2.3 million people are incarcerated in the United States. On any given day, more than one in 100 adults are in jail or prison (Pew Center on the States [Pew] 2008; West 2010). Driven by the tripling of the incarcerated population over the past three decades, the United States has the highest prison population rate in the world (Walmsley 2009)³ and one out of every 31 U.S. adults is under some form of correctional control (Pew 2008).⁴

The incarcerated population differs from the general population in important ways. Incarcerated persons are disproportionately likely to come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds; to be members of a racial/ethnic minority group; to have held a low-skill, low-paying job (if employed at all) at the time of arrest;

and to be less educated than their counterparts in the general population (Harlow 2003). In short, the sizeable incarcerated population consists of people in critical need of education to improve their post-release opportunities for employment and participation in civil society.

In addition to their educational needs, large incarcerated populations impose significant financial burdens on state budgets. From 2005 through 2009, for example, state spending on corrections grew faster than any other expenditure category, increasing 25 percent. In comparison, state spending on higher education increased 18 percent during the same period (National Association of State Budget Officers [NASBO] 2009). Taken together, states spend over \$52 billion annually on corrections and related activities (NASBO 2010), an amount that restricts discretionary monies available for other public outlays; one out of every 15 state discretionary spending dollars goes toward corrections-related costs (Pew 2008).

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Focusing on Postsecondary Education in Prisons

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Despite the positive outcomes associated with PSCE, discussion of postsecondary opportunity for the nation's prison population is notably absent from the top tier of state and federal policy agendas. This lack of topline policy attention to PSCE is detrimental to the country—postsecondary education has a critical role to play in mitigating challenging social conditions exacerbated by high incarceration levels. As policymakers consider ways to increase educational attainment, generate future economic growth, and reduce public expenditures, educational opportunity for the incarcerated population should be a meaningful component of policy strategies.

Informing Conversations, Moving Policy Debates

Built on results of a national survey of state correctional education administrators (CEAs), this brief presents unique policy-relevant information on the availability, administration, and funding of PSCE in state prison systems, aiming to increase the policy attention paid to postsecondary opportunity for incarcerated persons. Findings and analysis highlight student enrollments and completions, instructional methods, eligibility requirements, and funding sources of postsecondary education programs in state prison systems. Decision makers need to understand this information as they design policies and practices to increase the educational attainment and market-relevant skill acquisition of the nation's prison population.

We begin by providing context for the study, including an overview of the federal policy environment for PSCE. Subsequent sections discuss survey results and key findings. The brief concludes with policy recommendations designed to improve delivery of and access to postsecondary education in state prison systems. ❧

Postsecondary Education in Prisons: A Federal Policy Lens

The federal policy environment for PSCE provides a context for an analysis of survey responses collected in support of this brief. Previous research into funding, administration, and use of PSCE suggests that federal policy significantly affects state provision of such programs. In our discussion, we highlight key federal policies that affect PSCE, emphasizing recent statutory adjustments to student eligibility and program funding structures.

Student Financial Aid Eligibility

As with postsecondary education generally, federal financial aid availability and eligibility requirements impact access to PSCE. Establishment of the federal Pell Grant program in 1972 had a dramatic effect on the fiscal accessibility of postsecondary education to the prison population (Welsh 2002). The Pell Grant program awards federal student aid for postsecondary education on the basis of financial need. Given the preponderance of low-income persons in the nation's penal systems (Harlow 2003; Harrison and Beck 2006), many people have been able to use Pell Grants while incarcerated to fund their postsecondary pursuits (Tewksbury and Taylor 1996; Zook 1994). These grants have allowed incarcerated students to be less reliant on private or state support as they pursued postsecondary education.

In the mid-1990s, changing attitudes and policies toward crime led to the elimination of Pell Grant eligibility for prisoners through a provision in the Violent Crime Control Act of 1994 (Ubah 2004; Zook 1994). This policy change was based on the idea that awarding Pell Grants to prisoners limited nonprisoner access to the grants (Erisman and Contardo 2005), as well as challenging political environments created by a hostile, anti-education, anti-inmate ethos in Congress and society at large (Gehring 1997).

Eligibility for student financial aid for incarcerated persons remains a politically charged issue—particularly in the midst of fiscal uncertainty—but the issue of prisoner access to traditional federal need-based financial aid programs is likely to remain on the federal policy agenda.

Federal Grant Aid to States

Four years after stripping incarcerated students of their Pell eligibility, Congress revisited the issue of federal support for postsecondary education in prisons, enacting the Workforce and Community Transition Training for Incarcerated Youth Offenders Program (IYO). The IYO grant program provided funding to cover the costs of postsecondary academic and vocational education for youth offenders, as well as employment counseling and other related services (U.S. Department of Education 2009). Eligibility for IYO grants required state PSCE programs to limit participants to persons 25 years and younger who had earned a high school diploma or GED certificate and were within five years of release. The IYO statute also limited per-student state spending on PSCE, effectively restricting the number of units a student could take at any one time and lengthening the time to program completion. Since their inception, IYO grants and successor programs have become the most commonly used source of revenue to support PSCE programming (Erisman and Contardo 2005).

BOX 1: Previous Investigation into Postsecondary Correctional Education Policy

In 2005, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) published a significant report examining postsecondary correctional education and policy: *Learning to Reduce Recidivism: A 50-State Analysis of Postsecondary Correctional Education Policy* (Erisman and Contardo 2005). The authors conducted a broad survey of correctional education administrators from 45 states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The survey asked specific questions regarding postsecondary education offered in each prison system; it collected data on eligibility requirements, enrollment patterns, graduation rates, instructional methods, and funding sources. Findings from the investigation revealed PSCE program offerings, delivery methods, funding sources, and barriers to participation.

Of the 45 state prison systems included in the analysis, 43 offered some form of postsecondary education. Notably the authors found that participation rates had returned to pre-1994 levels, when federal policy changes eliminated prisoners' eligibility for Pell Grants.

In 2005, funding sources were found to be diverse, ranging from federal and state funding to prisoner self-funding. The most commonly cited funding source was federal block grants administered through the Federal Incarcerated Youth Offender program.

Recommendations from the report focused heavily on funding; they included reinstating Pell Grant eligibility for prisoners; expanding federal grant programs aimed at PSCE; allocating additional state funds to the public colleges and universities that provide instruction for postsecondary correctional education programs; and allowing prisoners to be eligible for state need-based financial aid.

To access and download a copy of this report, go to the IHEP Web site at <http://www.ihep.org/publications/publications-detail.cfm?id=47>.

In 2008, Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed into law the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (P.L. 110-315) (HEOA 2008). HEOA 2008 renamed the IYO program the Workforce and Community Transitions Training for Incarcerated Individuals Program (IIP) and changed key components on the statute. For instance, the law adjusted eligibility requirements for participation in postsecondary education, including raising the age eligibility limit from 25 to 35 years. The statute also increased states' flexibility in selecting program participants, the maximum financial expenditure allowed per student, and the length of time students may spend in remedial education after receiving a high school diploma. These three changes increased policy flexibility for states and enabled more people to be eligible for PSCE funding (Linton 2009).

Although advocates of PSCE welcomed the expanded age eligibility and flexibility in delivery, certain provisions of HEOA 2008 placed new restrictions on eligibility for certain offenders and reduced overall federal financial support for PSCE initiatives. On the fiscal front, support for PSCE declined significantly; appropriations decreased from nearly \$23 million in 2008 to \$17 million in fiscal year 2009 (U.S. Department of Education 2010).

Turning to prisoner eligibility, sections of the HEOA 2008 Act required that states no longer provide funds for PSCE to individuals convicted of specified sexual offenses or murder. Moreover, the bill extended the ban on Pell Grant eligibility to individuals committed to involuntary civil commitment centers; these centers typically house released persons convicted of a

sexual crime. It is important to note, however, that the HEOA 2008 Act maintained Pell eligibility for individuals held in detention centers and halfway houses.

A second notable policy action was the 2008 adoption of the Second Chance Act (P.L. 110-199), which was designed to improve reentry prospects for incarcerated persons. The legislation authorized federal grants to government agencies and nonprofit organizations to provide a range of services, including education, aimed at reducing recidivism (Council of State Governments 2010). Nearly \$90 million was appropriated toward a wide range of education programming; a portion of this money went toward PSCE programs (Linton 2009). However, the recent fiscal climate has placed increasing pressure on state budgets, calling into question the ability of states to maintain funding commitments to PSCE in spite of federal grant funding (Scott-Hayward 2009).

Federal policy actions have provided funding for postsecondary education in prisons, defined age and other eligibility requirements, and structured (to varying extents) program administration and delivery. However, outside the federal prison system, state prison systems are responsible for implementing postsecondary education programs and policy.

To gain insight into how states administer, deliver, and fund postsecondary education for incarcerated persons, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) conducted a national survey of state-level correctional education administrators (**SEE BOX 2**). ❧

BOX 2: Methods and Analysis

The data for this brief were gathered from a 19-item Web-based national survey of CEAs. Forty-three states responded, for an 86 percent response rate.* Using the Association of Correctional Education Administrators biannual membership publication, we identified the head CEA of postsecondary correctional education in each of the 50 states. When possible, names and contact information were cross-checked against the Department of Education's Education Resource Organizations Directory and through individual state department of corrections Web sites. Follow-up telephone calls were made to verify the names and contact information.

The survey was divided into five sections: (1) Respondent information; (2) postsecondary education offerings and funding structures; (3) program delivery methods; (4) program participation; and (5) observed outcomes of PSCE programs. Additional questions collected demographic and contextual information on responding states. See Appendix A for a copy of the survey instrument.

IHEP staff analyzed the survey results and secondary data drawn from national datasets, and wrote the findings. As a final step, key findings and policy recommendations were shared and discussed with external reviewers and decision makers whose work touches on PSCE delivery and policy implementation.

* The following states did not respond to the survey: Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

Postsecondary Education in Prisons: Results of a National Survey

As noted previously, recent changes to federal statutes have both restricted funding and enhanced access to PSCE for specific categories of prisoners. However, little is known about the effects of the current policy environment on state administration, funding, and delivery of postsecondary education in prison systems. Building on IHEP's previous work, we conducted a national survey of correctional education administrators to examine the details of postsecondary education programs in state prison systems.

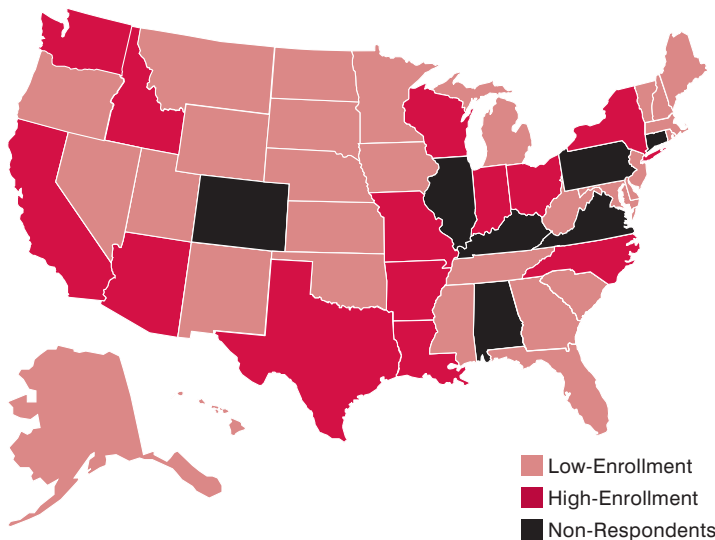
The survey collected information on student enrollments and completions, instructional methods, eligibility requirements, and funding sources of postsecondary education programs in state prison systems. The data suggest that despite key changes in policy and in the fiscal constraints on state budgets, postsecondary education remains available in state correctional facilities across the nation. However, we observed variation in all categories: Enrollments, completions, delivery methods, eligibility requirements, and use of various funding sources for PSCE programs.

Enrollments in Postsecondary Correctional Education

Of the 43 states that responded to the survey, all offer some kind of postsecondary correctional education: Academic, vocational, or a combination of the two. During the 2009–10 academic year, approximately 71,000 incarcerated persons were enrolled in some form of postsecondary education program, representing approximately 6 percent of the incarcerated population in the responding states (BJS 2009). The predominant form of education offered is vocational; roughly half of incarcerated students participating in PSCE were enrolled in vocational education programs.

FIGURE 1

U.S. States, by Enrollment Category, Academic Year 2009–10



SOURCE: INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY SURVEY (2010)

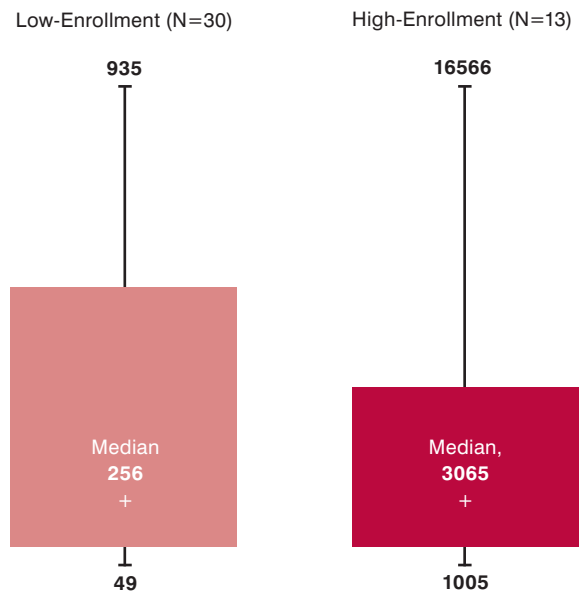
Among responding states, significant variation was observed in total enrollments. North Carolina, for instance, reported that approximately 16,500 prisoners were enrolled in some form of postsecondary education, while South Dakota reported an enrollment of fewer than 50 students. Prison systems that reported large postsecondary enrollments differ from those with a smaller student enrollment. Systems with large enrollments tend to have larger total prison populations, to focus on short vocational degree and certificate programs, and to benefit from state public funding for postsecondary correctional education.

As the first step in our analysis, we assigned the responding states to one of two categories: (1) Low-enrollment or (2) high-enrollment systems. State prison systems that enroll more than

⁵ We follow Erisman and Contardo (2005) in using this convention, so we are able to make comparisons in some areas between the two reports. Moreover, the split between low- and high-enrollment states in our survey responses was similar to that observed by Erisman and Contardo (2005), which found that 14 state prison systems enrolled more than 1,000 inmates; these states account for 89 percent of inmates enrolled in postsecondary education programs.

FIGURE 2

Range of Enrollments, by Enrollment Type, Academic Year 2009–10



SOURCE: INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY SURVEY (2010)

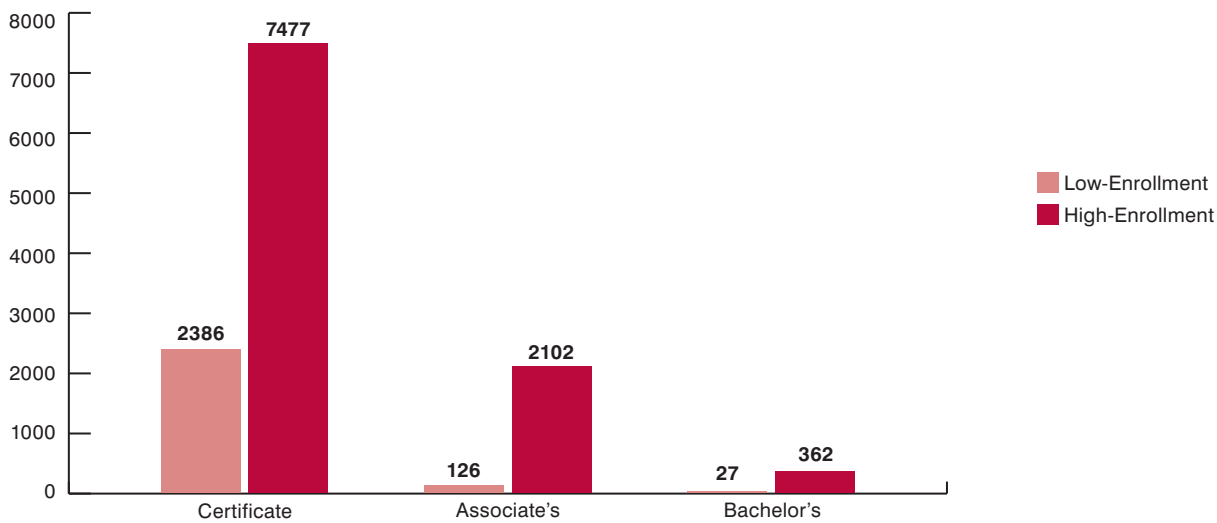
1,000 incarcerated students were deemed high-enrollment; those that enroll fewer than 1,000 were deemed low-enrollment.⁵ **FIGURE 1** maps respondent states' prison systems according to these two categories.

Thirteen states served more than 1,000 students and were categorized as high-enrollment states for the purpose of analysis. These 13 states educated 86 percent (61,000) of the total incarcerated student population from responding states during academic year 2009–10. Thirty responding states enrolled fewer than 1,000 students annually.

Survey responses demonstrated considerable variation in the average number of students served. At the median, high-enrollment systems educated nearly 3,100 students annually, and low-enrollment systems educated approximately 250 students (**SEE FIGURE 2**). Because of these considerable differences in median enrollment, we report our results for both low- and high-enrollment prison systems.

TABLE 1

Total Degrees Awarded, by Degree Type and Enrollment Level, Academic Year 2009–10



SOURCE: INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY SURVEY (2010)

Educational Focus and Degree Completions

High-enrollment systems enroll the highest percentage of total incarcerated students in both academic and vocational postsecondary education programs. Survey results indicate that PSCE programs are not producing academic degrees in large numbers. Most incarcerated students earn certificates through vocational education, perhaps in part because of the short-term nature of both the certificate programs and the students' sentences. States reported that approximately 9,900 incarcerated persons earned a certificate in the 2009–10 academic year; 2,200 associate's degrees were awarded, and nearly 400 students earned bachelor's degrees (SEE TABLE 1). These results represent a slight increase over findings from the previous report.⁶

Delivery Methods of Postsecondary Education in Prisons

Survey respondents reported that the most common form of program delivery was onsite, in-class instruction; in fact, all 43

states offered onsite instruction (SEE TABLE 2). CEAs identified several challenges related to in-class instruction, including limited physical space for classroom facilities, security concerns, and an undersupply of qualified instructors. Finding qualified instructors is particularly difficult for facilities in rural areas, where local labor markets often lack properly trained instructors and recruiting individuals to commute from more metropolitan areas is difficult to sustain with consistency.

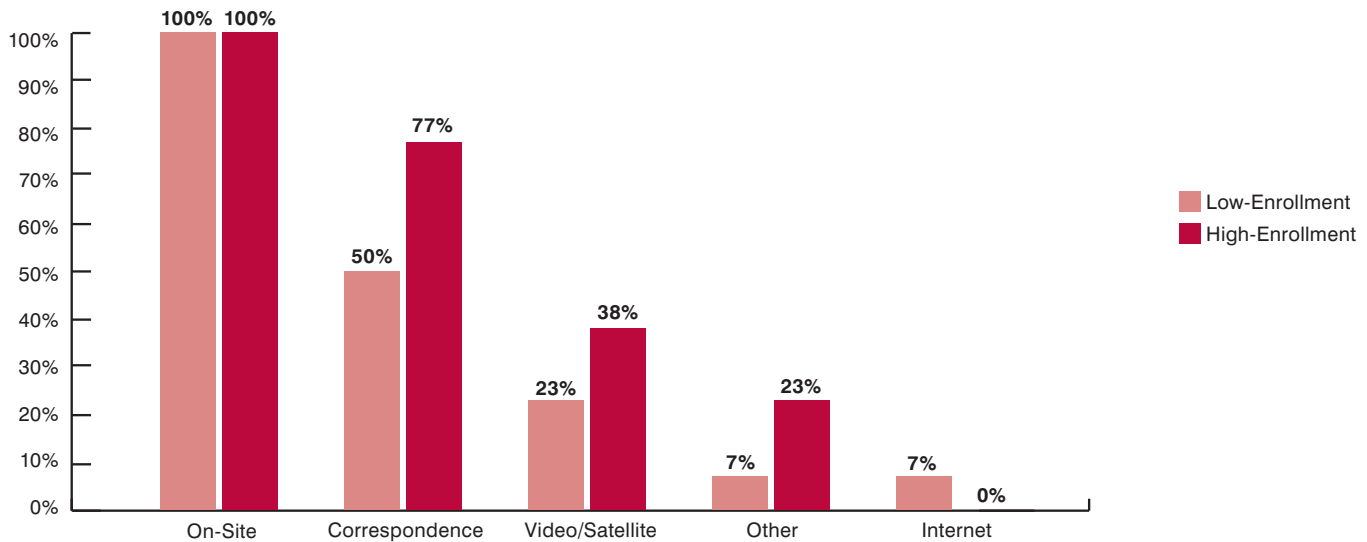
One way prison systems overcome some of these challenges is by relying on correspondence courses. Over three-quarters of high-enrollment systems offer educational programs through correspondence courses. In contrast, only half of low-enrollment systems offer correspondence courses (SEE TABLE 2). Corrections officials typically must approve the courses, and students bear the cost of these programs in most instances, which creates additional administrative and financial barriers to program participation that may be difficult for low-enrollment systems to overcome.

⁶ In their 2005 study, Erisman and Contardo reported that 1,748 students earned associate's degrees and 216 earned bachelor's degrees. Direct comparisons must be made cautiously; data in both cases were self-reported by correctional education administrators and could not be independently verified. Moreover, the states included in the two studies differ because different states participated, so comparisons across time are suggestive only.

States were less likely to use online or video/satellite instructional methods compared with in-class instruction. Overall, only 12 of the 43 states used this instructional method—38 percent of high-

TABLE 2

Types of Instruction Offered by Postsecondary Correctional Education Programs, by Enrollment Type



NOTE: "OTHER" INCLUDES COLLEGE LEVEL EXAMINATION PROGRAM TESTS AND TAKING PRISONERS OFFSITE TO PARTICIPATE IN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS ON POSTSECONDARY CAMPUSES.

SOURCE: INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY SURVEY (2010)

enrollment systems and nearly a quarter of low-enrollment systems use these technologies for program delivery (SEE TABLE 2). These figures represent a decrease in distance learning and video/satellite instruction from the findings of Erisman and Contardo (2005).⁷

Despite the limited number of states currently using video/satellite instructional methods, CEAs look to technology as an innovative way to improve the delivery of PSCE and to increase access. A fifth of the states cited technology as a potential innovation to improve access to PSCE for prisoners. Distance learning through secured Internet access, video instruction, and hybrid courses that include both onsite teaching and a correspondence model were all suggested as ways states could expand their delivery of PSCE. However, nearly all states prohibit Internet use by prisoners, limiting technology-based access to educational opportunities; this reality is reflected in results that show negligible use of the Internet to deliver PSCE to incarcerated students.

The ban on Internet use has strong implications for many aspects of PSCE, including access to course materials, study resources, student support information, and distance learning programming. Mirroring a transition in postsecondary education generally, many distance learning (or correspondence) courses have moved online, away from traditional paper and mail courses, further limiting prisoners' access to PSCE. Online education in prisons would require the provision of safe and secure Internet portals. However, prisons often lack resources for computers, Internet, and video instruction.

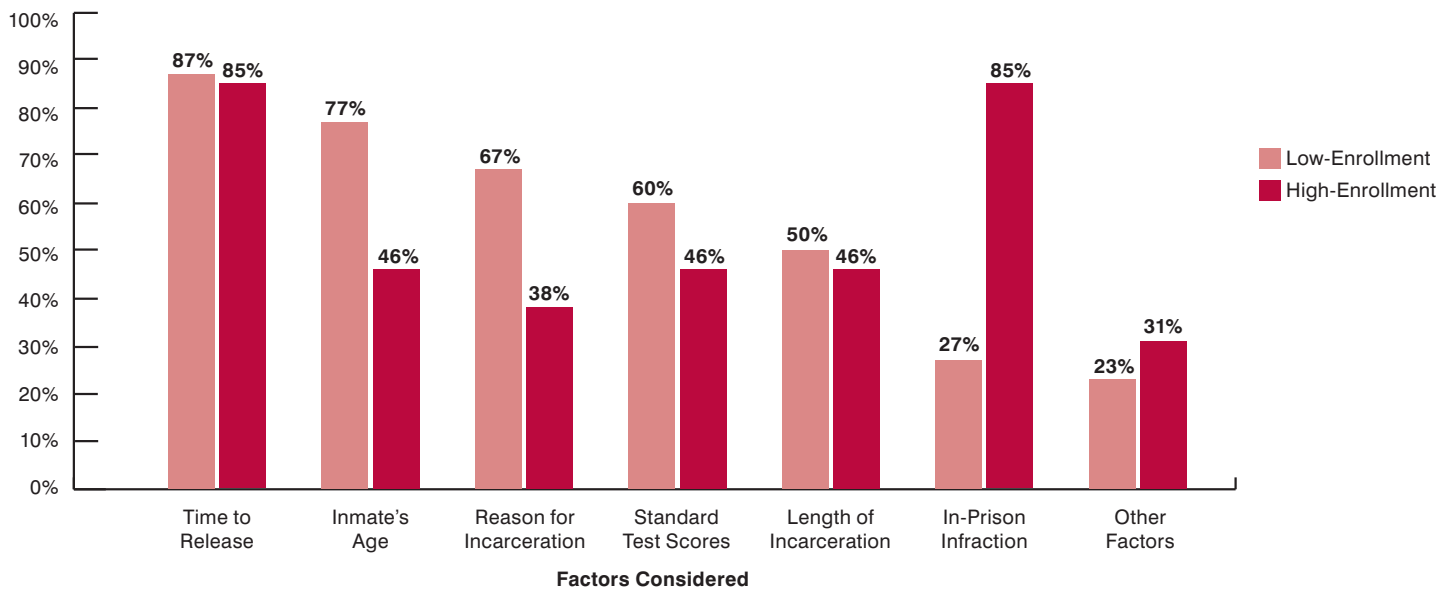
Eligibility Requirements for Participation

Participation in postsecondary education is dictated by a series of eligibility requirements beyond the high school diploma or GED credential. Some of these requirements are based on state statutes, while others are the result of participation in federal grant programs. The IIP, for instance, dictates that participation in postsecondary education be limited to persons 35 years of age or younger. The use of eligibility requirements reflects the prison system's assessment of who is most likely to benefit from participation in postsecondary education—an important consideration in justifying funding streams.

⁷ Anecdotal evidence from the survey provided one possible explanation for this decrease: Elimination of a federally-funded distance-learning program called the Corrections Learning Network, which provided extensive video-formatted educational programs to prisons. For a discussion of expanding distance learning in prisons see Nick et al. (2009).

TABLE 3

Factors Affecting Prisoner Eligibility for Postsecondary Correctional Education, by Enrollment Type



SOURCE: INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY SURVEY (2010)

Low-enrollment systems reported using an array of criteria to define eligibility for participation in PSCE. With the exception of in-prison infractions and undefined requirements, low-enrollment systems were more likely than high-enrollment systems to consider all the eligibility factors included on the survey: Time to release, age, reason for incarceration, standardized test scores, and length of sentence (SEE TABLE 3).

The responses indicated that high-enrollment systems are more likely to tie participation in postsecondary education to behavior: Eleven of 13 high-enrollment systems reported using in-prison infractions to screen for participation in PSCE.

Noncategorized responses—captured in “other factors”—included ability to pay for a course, employability test scores, security status, college placement exam scores, and prisoner willingness to sign a role model agreement form.

Funding of Postsecondary Education in Prisons

Survey respondents reported using a variety of funding sources to support postsecondary education programs. The most common source was federal grant funding from the IIP (SEE TABLE 4). Ninety-five percent of responding states reported using IIP grants, including all the high-enrollment systems and 28 out of 30 of the low-enrollment systems.

A critical difference in funding between low- and high-enrollment systems was the availability of state funds to support postsecondary education in prison systems. Ten of the 13 high-

enrollment systems used state funds, compared with only seven of the 30 low-enrollment systems (SEE TABLE 4). The variations in state support for PSCE illustrate the importance of state appropriations for increasing access to education in prison.

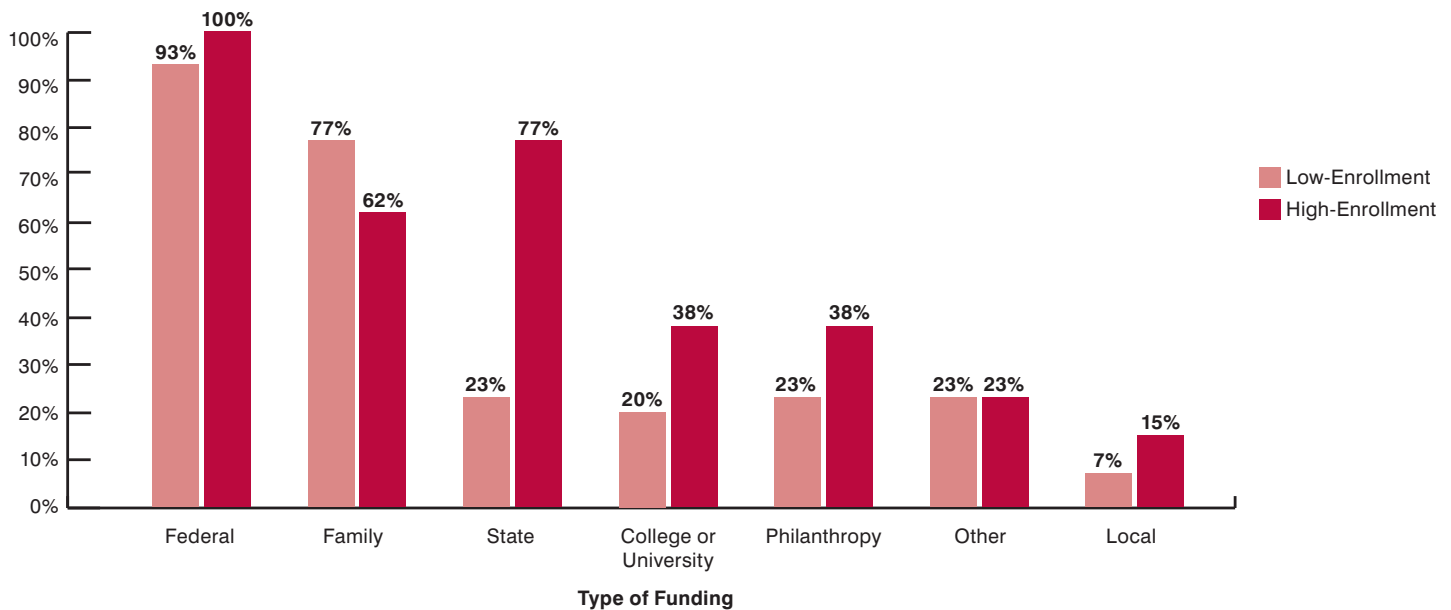
State support typically reflects a commitment to PSCE and a generally more supportive policy environment for providing postsecondary educational opportunities to incarcerated persons. In this environment, it may be easier for high-enrollment systems to garner support and resources to educate more incarcerated persons. Although the survey data do not include the amount of funding state prison systems receive, results suggest that the presence of state funding is a factor in the higher number of prisoners who participate in PSCE.

In addition to federal and state funding, incarcerated persons and their families can self-finance participation in PSCE. Seventy-seven percent of low-enrollment systems and 62 percent of high-enrollment systems use family funds to cover the costs of PSCE. The need to supply their own funding increases the difficulty of obtaining postsecondary education for a student population that is typically from a low-income background. Prisoner self-funding is limiting, because few incarcerated people earn enough money to cover the cost of PSCE courses. Their lack of eligibility for traditional federal need-based financial aid places an increased burden on prisoners who must self-fund their educational pursuits.

Not surprisingly, the key challenge to maintaining broad-based PSCE programs is financial. Nearly 90 percent of the survey

TABLE 4

Percentage of Prison Systems using Various Funding Sources for PSCE, by Enrollment Type



SOURCE: INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY SURVEY (2010)

respondents reported financial constraints and related funding policies as an acute challenge facing state correctional facilities.⁸ Many respondents indicated that a lack of funding is the primary barrier to enrolling additional students in PSCE. One CEA said, “The greatest challenge we face is financial. Logistically, we have the capacity to implement more programs than we currently have.”

Summary of Key Findings

The results of IHEP’s national survey of correctional education administrators reflect the prevalence of PSCE across the states. The survey results and analysis highlight student enrollments and completions, instructional methods, eligibility requirements, and funding sources of postsecondary education programs in state prison systems. There is considerable variation among the responding states, especially between low- and high-enrollment systems. The following are key findings from the analysis:

- Participating states reported approximately 71,000 persons enrolled in vocational or academic postsecondary education programs in prisons for academic year 2009–10; approximately 6 percent of the incarcerated population in these states.
- Thirteen high-enrollment states accounted for 86 percent of all incarcerated postsecondary students in the state prison systems included in this study.

- Incarcerated students are not earning two- or four-year postsecondary degrees in significant numbers. Data collected in the survey indicated that three out of every four students were enrolled in a vocational or certificate program. Although all types of PSCE are valuable, survey results indicate that most incarcerated students are not on an educational pathway likely to result in academic degree attainment.

- Postsecondary correctional education is delivered primarily through onsite instruction. Survey respondents reported logistical challenges associated with providing education in a prison and recommended technology as one way to improve the delivery of PSCE.
- Security protocols and state statutes were identified as significant barriers to expanding the use of Internet technologies to support delivery of postsecondary education in prisons.
- A critical challenge facing CEAs is securing funding, a reality that may worsen in coming years because of the financial constraints of state budgets.
- Incarcerated students continue to be denied access to federal and state-based financial aid programs, a policy choice that restricts incarcerated persons from financing participation in postsecondary correctional education programs. ❌

⁸ Eighty-eight percent of states that answered the question (32/36) cited fiscal challenges related to PSCE.

Moving Forward: Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Given that roughly 95 percent of incarcerated persons are expected to return to society, programs and initiatives designed to increase the likelihood of successful reentry are critical to individuals and to society at large. Postsecondary education has been identified as one factor that facilitates successful reentry. Positive post-release outcomes associated with participation in PSCE include increased educational attainment, reduced recidivism rates, and improved employment opportunities and earnings (Gaes 2008; Meyer et al. 2010; Winterfield et al. 2009)—all factors that support broader policy goals of increasing national educational attainment, broadening the tax base, and reducing public expenditures.

Despite the alignment of PSCE outcomes with national policy priorities and the known benefits of PSCE for individuals, our survey of correctional education administrators reveals that incarcerated persons have limited postsecondary education opportunities, primarily because of federal and state policy choices.

Incarcerated persons are ineligible for nearly all federal and state need-based financial aid programs; are overwhelmingly enrolled in vocational and other nonacademic certificate programs; and are prohibited from taking advantage of Internet-based educational programs and resources. Although the political and moral rationales for PSCE policies are diverse and complex, the outcome is that incarcerated persons have few options for education beyond the secondary level.

On the basis of the results and analysis of our survey, we offer three recommendations to facilitate effective policy innovations in the area of PSCE. These recommendations are intended to advance public policy goals of increasing skill and educational acquisition for incarcerated persons and reducing unsustainably high recidivism rates.

Recommendation 1:

To address capacity challenges limiting access to postsecondary education, federal and state statutes and regulations should be revised to support development and expansion of Internet-based delivery of postsecondary education in prisons.

The results of IHEP's survey indicate that access to postsecondary education in prison systems is dictated in large part by the ability of these systems to identify appropriate instructors for vocational and academic coursework; find classroom space where educational instruction can take place; and identify funding to support PSCE initiatives. In each area, program administrators face both logistical and financial challenges.

On the logistical front, CEAs report challenges in identifying and recruiting instructors; this problem is particularly acute in rural areas, where local labor markets often cannot support instructor requirements. Respondents also report difficulties finding classroom space for educational activities. On the financial front, survey results suggest that limited state support for PSCE is artificially capping enrollment; numerous respondents suggest that PSCE enrollments are restricted in their prison systems because of a lack of state funds.

Taken together, these access challenges reflect an overarching limit in the capacity of state prison systems to provide postsecondary educational opportunity to incarcerated persons. To address this capacity challenge, postsecondary education initiatives in prisons should emulate the general trends in postsecondary education and move educational content online to Internet-based platforms.

Allowing Internet-based course delivery would address the three challenges outlined above. Internet-based instruction allows a single instructor to deliver educational content to an unlimited number of incarcerated students across multiple prisons or even prison systems. Additionally, Internet-based coursework allows more students to be educated in a reduced space at their own pace—computer labs can accommodate terminals that allow students to progress through individualized educational programs while sharing a physical space; something that is difficult to accommodate in traditional classroom settings. Finally, the economies of scale of Internet-based instructional methods would reduce the per-student cost of providing education, allowing state prison systems to make more efficient use of limited federal and state financial support.

Moving toward Internet-based delivery of postsecondary education would require significant reforms in relevant statutes and regulations, as well as assurances that security concerns regarding Internet access in prisons could be adequately addressed. A useful first step toward designing and implementing such programs would be to establish a pilot program at the federal or state level. A pilot program could develop widely acceptable security protocols for Internet access that could serve as a model from which other prison systems could learn. Funding for a model Internet-based postsecondary correctional education program could be supplied through federal grant programs or philanthropic entities.

Recommendation 2:

To increase educational attainment, support economic development, and make efficient use of limited public funding, postsecondary correctional education programs should be closely aligned with state postsecondary education systems and local workforce needs.

Survey results indicate that vocational and certificate programs permeate postsecondary education in state prison systems. What is unclear from our results is the extent to which these programs are aligned with state or local labor market needs. Programs that enable incarcerated persons to acquire vocational skills are valuable in and of themselves. But because gainful employment is one predictor of a decreased chance of recidivism (Gaes 2008), PSCE programs should ensure that the skills are appropriate for state and local labor markets. Learning vocational skills that are quickly made obsolete by technological advances or that are irrelevant to local employment opportunities is a waste of money by funders and effort by students. Where possible, state policymakers, postsecondary CEAs, and local business interests should align to develop relevant vocational training programs for state prison systems.

Beyond vocational education programs, state postsecondary education systems could support PSCE by ensuring that program and course offerings are covered in statewide transfer and articulation agreements. The overwhelming majority of PSCE participants do not receive degrees while they are in prison (in some cases, because of state law), so most PSCE participants leave prison with vocational or academic credits. Ensuring that these credits are readily transferable to public state institutions would send a strong signal of support for PSCE and mark the beginning of a constructive pathway back into traditional postsecondary education for formerly incarcerated people.

Recommendation 3:

To support increased access to postsecondary education in prisons, federal and state statutes should be amended to make specific categories of incarcerated persons eligible for need-based financial aid.

A glaring conclusion from the survey results and a review of relevant literature is that incarcerated persons are rarely eligible for need-based financial aid programs. At the federal level,


policy withholds Pell Grant funding from incarcerated persons, and state need-based funds are not available on a large scale.

The outcome of these policies is a two-tiered level of access to postsecondary education. Excluding age, test scores, length of sentence, and other eligibility requirements, prisoners with financial means or private support are more likely to be able to participate, while those from lower-income backgrounds have fewer educational opportunities.

This differing level of access is counter to postsecondary policy for the general public, where federal and state need-based aid programs have been successful in providing at least some educational opportunity to the most financially disadvantaged students if they meet educational criteria. Current PSCE policy has not afforded the same benefits to low-income incarcerated persons.

Although there may be legitimate concerns regarding expanding the population of prisoners eligible for need-based aid funds, federal and state prison systems employ numerous nonfinancial eligibility requirements that serve to limit the number of persons

who qualify to enroll in PSCE. Additional eligibility requirements could be attached to need-based financial aid programs to control costs and ensure that the aid is reaching students who are most likely to successfully complete coursework or degree programs. For instance, eligibility could be limited to first-time offenders who meet certain time-to-release guidelines. Additionally, aid could be limited to persons who participate in academic coursework or vocational programs tied directly to post-release employment opportunities.

Moving forward, policymakers should explore the possibility of targeting a limited number of need-based financial aid awards to incarcerated persons who meet a predetermined set of criteria. Blanket bans on the provision of need-based aid to all prisoners represent a one-size-fits-all approach to policy that restricts access to education for some individuals who could benefit greatly from public support of their educational pursuits. Participation in postsecondary correctional education has been linked to a number of desirable post-release outcomes. Policymakers should find ways to leverage established need-based financial aid programs to induce these outcomes in an increasing number of people. 

Appendix A: Prisoner Access to Postsecondary Education Survey

Thank you for taking the “Prisoner Access to Postsecondary Education” survey for the Institute for Higher Education Policy. The questions in this survey focus on postsecondary correctional education and aim to understand its funding and organization, as well as gain insight about inmates’ access to postsecondary education.

Name of Person Completing Survey: _____

Title: _____

Organization: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

E-mail: _____

State: _____

The following definitions are provided to assist you in answering the survey questions. Key terms include:

Adult Correctional Facility includes all confinement facilities administered by federal or state government or by private corporations primarily for federal or state government, which are intended for adults, but sometimes hold juveniles. This term includes prisons, penitentiaries, and correctional institutions as well as state-operated local detention facilities in Alaska, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Rhode Island, and Vermont

Postsecondary Education is defined as either traditional/academic or vocational/certificate coursework taken after a student receives a high school diploma or GED, for which a student can receive college credit toward a degree.

Traditional/Academic Coursework is defined as coursework for college credit that leads to an associate’s degree (e.g., A.A., A.S.), a bachelor’s degree (e.g., B.A., B.S.), or a graduate degree (e.g., M.A., M.S., J.D., Ph.D.).

Vocational/Certificate Coursework is defined as coursework for college credit that leads to an applied degree (e.g., A.A.S.) or a certificate (e.g., certificate in auto mechanics).

The following six questions focus on facilities:

1. How many adult correctional facilities in your state offered postsecondary education courses or programs during the 2009–10 academic year?

2. Please indicate the percentage of postsecondary education courses or programs offered during the 2009–10 academic year that are academic courses for college credit, vocational courses, or some other course type. Percentages should add up to 100 percent. If exact cannot be provided, please give your best estimate.

Academic _____%

Vocational _____%

Other _____%

3. Please list the names of the postsecondary educational institutions that provided instruction for any postsecondary education courses or programs offered.

4. What means were used to provide instruction for any postsecondary courses offered? Please check all that apply

- ☐ On-site instruction
- ☐ Video/satellite instruction
- ☐ Internet-based instruction
- ☐ Correspondence courses
- ☐ Other (please specify)

If you selected other, please specify _____

Video/satellite instruction

- ☐ One way
- ☐ Interactive

Internet-based instruction

- ☐ One way
- ☐ Interactive

5. What percentage of your state's overall adult correctional facilities population is believed to possess either a high school diploma or GED?

_____ %

6. In addition to possessing either a high school diploma or GED, what other factors influence inmates' eligibility to participate in postsecondary education programs? (Please check all that apply for all adult correctional facilities in your state, even if eligibility requirements vary among sites or programs)

- ☐ Inmate's age
- ☐ Reason for incarceration

- ☐ Length of incarceration
- ☐ Length of time to release
- ☐ Number of infractions while incarcerated
- ☐ Standardized test scores
- ☐ Other (please specify)

If you selected other, please specify _____

The following eight questions focus on inmates:

7. What is the total number of inmates who participated in institutionally-recognized postsecondary education courses or programs in your state during the 2009–10 academic year?

A. Total traditional/academic community college/associate's degree level _____

College or university/
bachelor's degree level _____

Graduate school/graduate
or professional degree level _____

B. Total vocational/certificate _____

8. Please indicate the number of inmates in your state who participated in the postsecondary education programs types listed below during the 2009–10 academic year. *This question is only concerned with inmates who took courses leading to college credit.* If exact numbers cannot be provided, please give your best estimate of the number of inmates who participated in each of the following programs types.

9. During the 2009–10 academic year, how many inmates who fulfilled the eligibility requirements were placed on postsecondary educational programming waitlists or were unable to participate?

Associate's degree (e.g., A.A., A.S., A.A.S.) _____

Bachelor's degree (e.g., B.A., B.S.) _____

Graduate degree (e.g., M.A., M.S., Ph.D.) _____

Vocational certificate _____

10. Can inmates in your state be awarded degrees for postsecondary coursework completed while incarcerated? (Please check one.)

- ☐ Yes, while incarcerated
☐ Yes, but only after release
☐ No

11. If inmates in your state can be awarded degrees, please indicate the number of degrees awarded to inmates in the 2009–10 academic year.

12. Does your state have a policy regarding inmate participation in postsecondary education via correspondence courses?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

Please describe this policy:

13. Please estimate the percentage of inmates in your state whose postsecondary education was funded through the following sources. Percentages should add up to 100 percent. If exact percentages cannot be provided, please give your best estimate. If you don't receive funding from any of these sources, please enter 0 in each box.

Federal Incarcerated Youth Offender Grant _____%

State funding _____%

Local funding _____%

College or university funding _____%

Personal or family finances _____%

Private funding (foundation, religious/
community group, individual donation, etc.) _____%

Other funding source _____%

Please specify private funding source(s): _____

Please specify other funding source(s): _____

14. Please use the following spaces to provide any additional comments about access to postsecondary education for prisoners in your state. In particular, we would be interested to know more about the following topics:

What, if any, special funding sources exist to help provide postsecondary education for prisoners in your state?

What, if any, particular challenges do you face in providing postsecondary education for prisoners (financial, political, administrative, logistical, etc.)?

What, if any, innovative means are used to provide access to postsecondary education for prisoners in your state?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey by the Institute for Higher Education Policy. Your responses are important and if there is any additional information you would like to provide, please use the following space or submit any documents to psce@ihep.org

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